



# Give Me an Estimate

When it's Okay to Guess in Genealogy

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As history researchers, we do not speculate. We test. We critically observe and carefully record. Then we weigh the accumulated evidence, analyzing the individual parts as well as the whole, without favoring any theory.

Research is much more than an accumulation of data. It is a process that requires continual comparison of new information against the old.

**Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained***

## **ALWAYS START WITH AN OBJECTIVE**

Good research objectives are specific. Look for one event at a time in one person's life. It is crucial for you to name the specific event and name the specific person you will seek.

## **WHEN YOU FIND SOMETHING, USE IT WELL**

- Document the family group record AS YOU GO. Cite all events including census, land purchases, moves, etc. for each person on the family group.
- Cite at least one source for every event. If a source mentions more than one event, cite that source **on each event it mentions**.
- Use research logs to show both positive and negative searches and to keep track of what you searched for (name/place variations etc.).
- If at first you don't succeed, keep the same objective, but switch the name spelling, the records, record types, repositories, or jurisdictions.

**What if you don't find what you're looking for? Sometimes you need to form a theory to test. Sometimes, you must guess...**

**NEVER present a "guess" as a known fact.** Always include a note or qualifier (abt, 'of,' est, calc,) to indicate that the theory is unproven

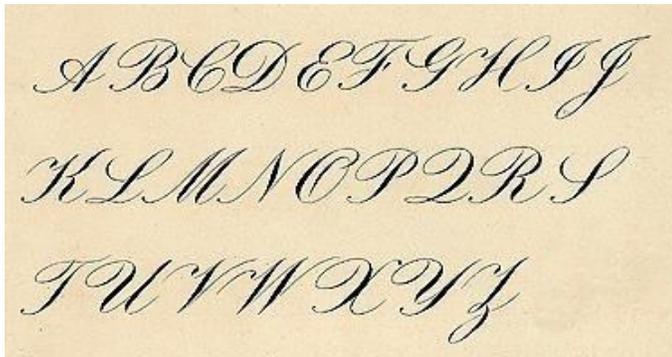
## **BEGIN WITH A FAMILY GROUP RECORD**

- Organize the known information.
- Gather the clues you need to guess well.
- Create a *timeline* of known information to identify gaps, migrations, possible birth/death dates. Use the timeline feature in your database program (RootsMagic, Ancestral Quest, Legacy) or make a simple table in your word processing program.

**In order to search for unknown details, you may need to estimate or “guess” names, dates or places.**

## **NAMES-STRATEGIES**

- Even if your family always spells perfectly, clerks don't. If a first search fails, try again using variant spellings of the name.
- Look for alternate spellings of a surname in the IGI (International Genealogical Index) on FamilySearch.
- Names may be listed in records by initials, abbreviations, or middle names. For example, William George DILTS might appear as W. G. DILTS, Wm. Geo. DILTS, or George DILTS.
- FamilySearch Wiki - [Abbreviations Lists for Personal Names \(English\)](#) (links to websites)
- FamilySearch Wiki: [Traditional Nicknames in Old Documents - A Wiki List](#).
- In old handwriting, uppercase letters "L" and "S" look alike, so an old name like "Lamuel" may appear as "Samuel" in a modern index.



- Also easily confused are "l" and "j"; lowercase double ss may look like "fs" or "ps."
- Be aware of commonly substituted or mistaken letters in handwritten records.
- FamilySearchWiki - [Spelling Substitution Tables for the United States and Canada](#).
- Consider the underpaid clerk who had to guess the spelling of a surname if the family didn't know, or the clerk was too polite to ask. His phonetic guess might be unique.

Scroll to the “Phonetic Substitutes Table” (at the bottom of the Spelling Substitution Tables – on FS Wiki).

- FamilySearch Wiki - [Guessing a Name Variation](#) suggestions:
- ❖ **Other indexes** - Look for the elusive name in an index by another company, if one is available.
- ❖ **Neighboring entries** - in book indexes. Find the place in a book index where the name should be, and search at least one index page preceding and one index page following that place for similar names. Look for slightly different spellings of the name.
- ❖ **Unusual occupation search** - A few indexes allow a search for occupations (sometimes a keyword search). If a hard-to-find ancestor has an unusual occupation, search the index for the occupation without a surname or given name. Browse through the results list for your ancestor.
- ❖ **Soundex vs exact spelling search** - Some computer indexes such as Ancestry.com allow a [Soundex](#) spelling search. Switch to this option to find names with similar but slightly different spellings.
- ❖ **Surname only search** - Sometimes it pays to search for the family surname in a specified state or county without a given name. Browse through the results list looking for your ancestor with an unexpected **given name** variation.
- ❖ **Given name only search** - In a specified state or county, search for your ancestor's given name without a surname. Browse through the results list looking for your ancestor with an unexpected **surname** variation.
- ❖ **Translated immigrant surname** - Some immigrants translated their surname into English. For example, *Schneider* means *Tailor*. If your ancestor was born in a foreign-language speaking nation, look for him under **both** the English and foreign-language version of the surname. Use dictionaries (such as German-English) to find possible name translations. For lists of such dictionaries use the [Family History Library Catalog Subject Search for "language."](#)
- ❖ **Translated immigrant given name** - Look for **both** foreign language and English versions of given names, for example, *Andrew* & *Andreas*. Get help from a given name dictionary.
- ❖ **Vowels** - Look for the name spelled with different vowels. For example, look for GILLESPIE under GALLESPIE. Use a wildcard search.
- ❖ **Double letters** - Search the index for the name with double letters added or deleted. For example, for the name FULLER, try FULER. For the name BAKER, try BAKKER.
- ❖ **Transposed Letters** - Look for the elusive name under spellings with each of the first four letters transposed. For example, look for WIGHT under IWGHT, WGIHT, WIHGT, and WIGTH.

## **DATES-STRATEGIES**

### **General parameters for ages:**

- Men married at about age 25
- Women married at about age 21
- In a first marriage, men and women are generally within 10 years of each other
- First child generally born about 1 year after marriage
- Children generally born every 2 years; watch for gaps in births of children
- Women typically bear children between 16 and 42 years of age
- Siblings are generally born within a 24 year span
- Consider social influences (including polygamy, size of families, wars)
- A younger daughter generally would not marry before an older sister
- Census records - **approximate** age
- Death records (secondary source for birth); tombstones (age at death in years-months-days)
- ALWAYS use abt, bef, aft, ca (circa), cal (calculated) or est (estimated) with an unproven date; or use a date range such as 1910/1912, if conflicting years have been found.
- Generally, siblings tend to die at ***roughly the same age.***

## **PLACES-STRATEGIES**

- Marriage usually in bride's hometown / parish / church
- First child usually born at place of marriage
- Use ages and birth places of children in census to determine migration dates and patterns
- Social Security Death Index – last place of residence indicates last payment, not necessarily death place
- City and Farm Directories
- Certain events imply proximity; proximity implies relationships. For example, Civil War regiments were often recruited in one county, and the recruits knew each other. (County histories proudly discuss those veterans.)
- Certain events are sometimes clustered in one place. Relatives are often found near each other in the same cemetery.
- ALWAYS use “OF” to indicate that a place is estimated and has not been proven (as in Of Butte, Silverbow, Montana).

## **REMEMBER:**

The genealogical process involves a lot of guessing (or hypothesis) about names, dates, places, relationships, and sources. We start with guesses about some of these, and then go out to find the sources and evidence that prove or disprove those guesses.

This means that genealogists need to be good guessers. Good guessers use all the clues available to them before making their best guess. From this guess they form a theory, which can be proven or disproven.

**The Key Principle is Straightforward:  
THE MORE YOU KNOW, THE BETTER YOU CAN GUESS.**

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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